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The Spitfire

Continued from page 12

for a time at least—should think the worst of
 you; though now I apologize to Miss Girard
 most profoundly."
 He bowed to that woman; but she passed
 the curtsy without acknowledgment, and
 put a pointed question.

ONE moment, Mr. Ormond. If it was a
 part of your plan, as I understand it, to
 lure this Mr.—er—Mr. Brown on board our
 yacht and hold him prisoner, then why did
 you refuse to pick him up when he was thrown
 from the tugboat?"

Ormond smiled. "My dear young lady, how
 could I do otherwise? I wished to display no
 personal interest whatever in the man, and
 correctly judged that you yourself would be-
 come his preserver. Result—what? He is
 brought aboard, a martyr and a hero. In the
 nobility of your spirit, you accuse me of in-
 humanity. I am forced to implicate your good
 father in order to secure your unsuspecting
 cooperation. You harbor doubts of me, in
 spite of evidence, and demand the gems, which
 you lock securely in the yacht's safe. Very
 good. But let us go a little deeper. I warn
 you against Mr. George C. Brown; but you
 refuse to accept my word. You interview
 the man himself, being predisposed to believe
 in him; yet, by your own astuteness, you see
 through his artfulness, withdraw your mis-
 placed sympathy, and force him to work his
 passage—a position in which he could give
 the least possible trouble to you—and to me.
 Believe me, my dear Miss Girard, had you
 been one of my own agents, you could not
 have rendered me a greater help."

Valda stared at him. In the light of cer-
 tain recent occurrences, there were grounds
 for thought. True, the statements of Ormond
 seemed similar to a carefully built house of
 cards that eventually must tumble by reason
 of its very flimsiness; yet, when she went
 back, step by step, picking up half neglected
 little incongruities, she saw a faint, far, glim-
 mering possibility that this house of cards
 would stand.

That she had fallen in love with George C.
 Brown, she acknowledged to herself; but
 acknowledged it with shame. That she wanted
 to believe in him, was the dearest wish of her
 heart and soul; but something had happened
 recently—a something of which she could not
 speak because of the pain of it and her own
 humanity—a something that had wiped away
 her faith and caused Ormond's accusations to
 ring in her ears like redhot bells of truth.

NOW this passive acceptance of the situa-
 tion on Valda's part began also to affect
 her father, who was striving to obliterate the
 personal equation and to work his business
 head. To him, likewise, Ormond's story
 smacked of "feathers and flea bites," and yet
 he had seen men in Wall Street make fortunes
 in the very teeth of apparent impossibility.
 Everything had been against them with the
 exception of a few ridiculous trivialities; but
 these same trivialities had swelled in the man-
 ner of balloons, till presently some bellowing
 bull would soar away to prosperity, leaving a
 batch of disgruntled bears to snuffle at a se-
 vered anchor rope. Therefore Marcus Girard
 began to consider trivialities.

"Mr. Ormond," he said, discarding his atti-
 tude of bluster, "I would like to ask you some
 questions."

"Do so by all means," begged that compla-
 cent man. "I am here for the purpose, and
 request you earnestly not to consider my per-
 sonal feelings in the least. As Miss Girard
 once put it, the matter is a business one."

Girard eyed him thoughtfully, then asked,
 "If you considered Mr. Brown a dangerous
 character, why did you not arrest him when
 first he came aboard, or immediately after my
 daughter had forced him to work his passage?"

"Because," returned Ormond, with a smile
 and a careless shrug, "the Captain of your
 yacht was not disposed to honor me with his
 complete official confidence; while your
 daughter's code of mercy might also prove a
 bar to drastic measures. An arrest would
 have merely precipitated trouble. Your crew,
 to a man, was on the side of Mr. George C.
 Brown. Mr. Tracy and myself would doubt-
 less have become ballast till the Spitfire
 reached New York, when the dashing hero
 would have dashed away, plus liberty and
 the laugh on me."

Girard grunted and tried again: "Why did
 you take the precaution to direct Captain
 Larris to lie off Sandy Hook and fly private
 signals?"

"For the reason," replied Ormond, "that
 these signals would be answered by a New
 York police boat waiting to back my poor
 authority in the matter of a protracted arrest.
 Meanwhile, Mr. Tracy and I have had an eye
 on our man night and day."

This seemed regular enough; still the finan-
 cier was not yet satisfied. "And why," he
 asked, "did you risk a trip across the Atlantic
 instead of going straight from Calais to Liver-
 pool?"

This time Ormond laughed. "My dear Mr.
 Girard, I knew you would ask that question;
 but, as a business man yourself, you will fully
 appreciate my reasons. The English Govern-
 ment offers one thousand pounds for the
 apprehension of George C. Brown; but in our
 own more generous country the reward is
 fixed at twenty thousand dollars. Hence, my
 choice—a trifle selfish, no doubt, but tongue
 and groove with wisdom and progress."

Girard tried to smile, and failed. That this
 man should quietly sacrifice him on the altar

of a legal reward was a piece of utterly as-
 tounding impudence; yet the matter was be-
 side the actual question. "Look here," he
 said, "it strikes me as a bit risky to use a
 valuable lot of gems as bait for a dangerous
 thief; and, by the way, Mr. Ormond, where
 did you get those gems?"

"Imitations," returned the unruffled one;
 "but such clever imitations that I defy you,
 as an expert, to tell them from the real article
 without a most careful examination."

"We'll see about that later," retorted Girard,
 while the business creases once more appeared
 round his incisive mouth. "In the meantime,
 just one more thing. You say you called on
 me at the Victoria with a view of securing my
 aid in this affair,—with the aim of borrowing
 my yacht, borrowing my name, and borrow-
 ing my valuable time in the interests of an
 utter stranger. Now, what reason, sir, had
 you to imagine, for one fraction of a minute,
 that I would not kick you all the way down
 stairs to the street where you belong?"

Ormond's eyes narrowed as he answered with
 a slow and cold assurance of his ground. "Be-
 cause of my intimate knowledge of your per-
 sonal affairs, which are guarded so carefully
 from the eyes and nose of the general public.
 Because of my acquaintance with your busi-
 ness patrons,—those Washington officials who
 stand with one hand on the helm of the ship of
 state and the other on the tape of a Wall Street
 ticker. Because—"

AGAIN Marcus Girard was on his feet, this
 time forgetting everything on earth be-
 yond the personal equation and a shot which,
 if not a bull's eye, came certainly within the
 outer ring. His face grew purple, while he
 swelled to the bursting point of rage.

"You hound!" he cried. "I'll settle with
 you for this! Yes, and for something else be-
 sides your blackmail! I'll settle with you for
 stealing my yacht in order to carry out your
 other theft! Do you think that I, an adult, in
 possession of my senses, would swallow this
 bunch of childish lies you are telling me? Non-
 sense, sir! You're a couple of crooks who have
 played your game and are caught with a
 crooked wheel! I know your breed, and now
 by Heaven—"

His fist came down with a crash on the table;
 but another fist came down beside it.

"Drop it!" commanded Ormond in a tone
 of stern authority. "I've stood enough of your
 garrulous noise! Sit down!"

No longer was the man a meek defender of a
 poor position, but a grim, relentless officer of
 the law, aroused at last to action. He placed
 two powerful hands on the shoulders of Marcus
 Girard and forced him into a seat, then stood
 over him, his eyes snapping and his jaw set.

"Do you suppose," he thundered, "that the
 United States Government cares a hang for
 you and your time and your little two-for-a-
 nickel yacht? If you've lost time, we'll pay
 for it; but in Heaven's name don't make a
 scene for which you will only be sorry in the
 end! I have tried to be patient; but even of-
 ficial courtesy must have its limits, sir! Now
 please be rational; otherwise you will force me
 —against my every peaceful inclination—to
 place you under arrest!"

HE flung back his coat, revealing a glittering
 police badge pinned on his breast, and
 Marcus Girard sat still and stared at it. He
 did so for two reasons. First, because it came
 to him that another Wall Street balloon was
 preparing for graceful flight; second, because
 for twenty years no one had dared to speak to
 him as Ormond spoke, and it took the old
 man's breath away. It was his own pet method
 of argument, and now he saw it work—though,
 truth to tell, the experiment failed to please
 him overmuch.

"Sir," continued Ormond, but in a far less
 forceful tone, "I can scarcely blame you for
 harboring doubts of me, and am trying to over-
 look your present attitude in the hope that you
 will remain no longer a bar to justice. Two
 courses are open to your choice. First, let
 matters rest as they are until we reach New
 York, where the police of that city will vindi-
 cate me of any intentional wrong to you and
 yours. The second is this: Call in Mr. George
 C. Brown and question him. If his own an-
 swers do not convince you of his knavery, then,
 my dear sir, you are at perfect liberty to pitch
 me overboard or otherwise deal with me at
 your own discretion."

Old Marcus Girard sat still and looked at
 him. He gave no further evidence of asserting
 his business mind, even though Captain Larris
 was now standing in the doorway.

"Valda," said Girard weakly, "ring the
 bell."

Valda complied, and soon the ministerial
 Migs appeared.

"Migs," said the master, "go tell Mr.
 George C. Brown that he is wanted here im-
 mediately!"

"Yes, sir," returned the steward solemnly,
 and departed on his errand.

For five minutes there was silence in the
 main saloon,—a thoughtful silence, broken
 only by the whistling of the wind and the splash
 of waves against the Spitfire's sides. Tracy
 had acquitted himself with glory worthy of a
 wreath; for, with the one exception of a
 throaty groan, his mouth had remained as
 firmly closed as that of the long departed
 Keats. Miss Valda Girard had also observed
 a rigid obedience of instructions by keeping
 her eye "on dad." She was, however, just a
 trifle disappointed.

To be continued next Sunday



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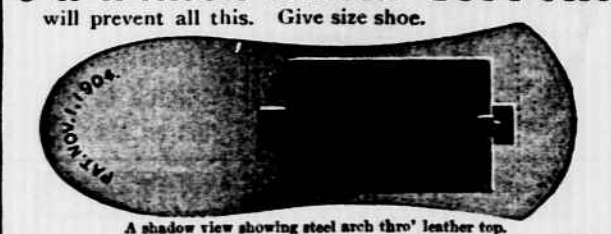
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